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SHAKESPEARE'S HANDWRITING

CONTENTS

EXPLANATORY NOTE

PLATE I.

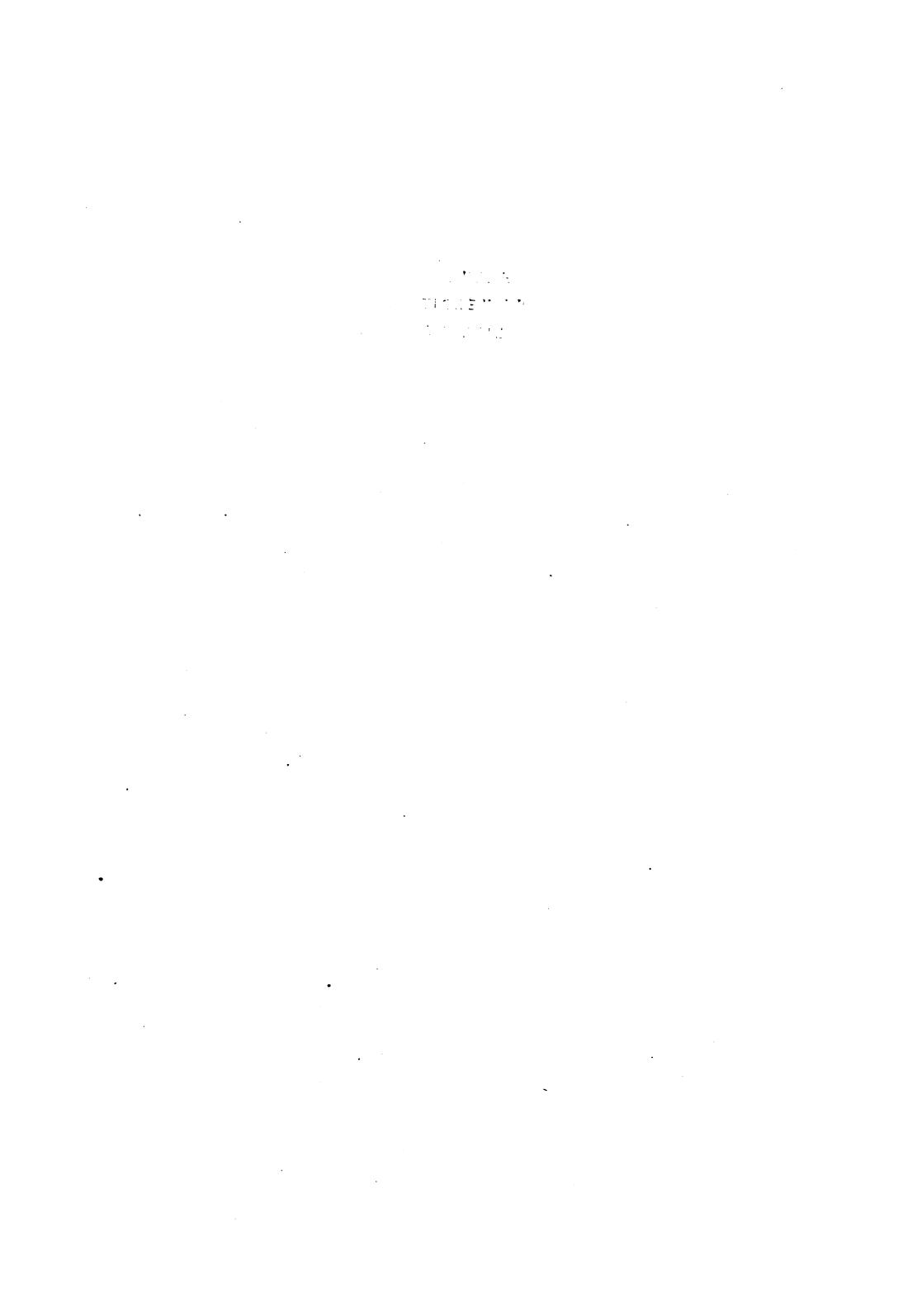
SHAKESPEARE'S SIGNATURE, MARCH 10, 1613

PLATE II.

SHAKESPEARE'S SIGNATURE, MARCH 11, 1613

PLATE III.

SHAKESPEARE'S THREE SIGNATURES TO HIS WILL



EXPLANATORY NOTE.

The only extant specimens of Shakespeare's Handwriting that are of undisputed authenticity consist of the five autograph signatures which are reproduced here. As in the case of Edmund Spenser and of almost all the great authors who were contemporary with Shakespeare, no fragment of Shakespeare's Handwriting outside his signatures—no letter nor any scrap of his literary work—is known to be in existence.

These five signatures were appended by the poet to the following documents :—

The Purchase-deed (on parchment), dated March 10, 1613, of a house in Blackfriars, which the poet then acquired. (Now in the Guildhall Library, London.)

A Mortgage-deed (on parchment), dated March 11, 1613, relating to the house in Blackfriars, purchased by the poet the day before. (Now in the British Museum.)

The Poet's Will, finally executed in March 1616, within a month of his death. This document, which is now at Somerset House, London, consists of three sheets of paper, at the foot of each of which Shakespeare signed his name.

SHAKESPEARE'S
HANDWRITING.

In all the signatures Shakespeare used the old 'English' mode of writing, which resembles that still in vogue in Germany. During the seventeenth century the old 'English' character was finally displaced in England by the 'Italian' character, which is now universal in England and in all English-speaking countries. In Shakespeare's day highly-educated men, who were graduates of the Universities and had travelled abroad in youth, were capable of writing both the old 'English' and the 'Italian' character with equal facility. As a rule they employed the 'English' character in their ordinary correspondence, but signed their names in the 'Italian' hand. Shakespeare's use of the 'English' script exclusively was doubtless a result of his provincial education. He learnt only the 'English' character at school at Stratford-on-Avon, and he never troubled to exchange it for the more fashionable 'Italian' character in later life.

Men did not always sign their names in the same way in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Shakespeare does not seem to have adopted an unchangeable mode of spelling when affixing his signature to the documents described.

PLATES I. and II.—The signature to the first document is commonly read as 'William Shakspere,' though in all other portions of the deed the surname is spelt 'Shakespeare.' The signature to the second document has been interpreted both as 'Shakspere' and 'Shakspeare.' In neither of

EXPLANATORY NOTE.

these signatures are the letters following the first 'e' in the second syllable fully written out. They are indicated by a flourish above the 'e.' Shakespeare apparently deemed it needful to confine his signature to the narrow strip of parchment that was inserted in the fabric of the deed to bear the seal, and he consequently lacked adequate space wherein to complete his autograph. The flourish above the 'e' has been held to represent the cursive mark of abbreviation for 're' which was in use among mediæval scribes. It is doubtful, however, whether mediæval methods of handwriting were familiar to Shakespeare or his contemporaries. In the second of the two signatures, the flourish has also been read as 'a'. But in both cases the flourish has possibly a less determinate significance than any which has hitherto been assigned to it. It may be in both autographs no more than a hasty dash of the pen—a rough and ready indication that the writer was hindered from completing the word that he had begun by the narrowness of the strip of parchment to which he was seeking to restrict his handwriting. Whether, therefore, the surname in the two documents should be interpreted as 'Shakspere' or 'Shakspeare' cannot be stated positively.

The seal, of which an impression in wax is attached by a parchment tag to each of these documents, bears the initials 'H.L.' These initials are those of Henry Lawrence, one of the witnesses to Shakespeare's signature. Lawrence was 'servant' or clerk to Robert Andrewes,

SHAKESPEARE'S HANDWRITING.

the scrivener who drew the two deeds. (Lee's 'Life of Shakespeare,' pp. 267-8.)

PLATE III.—The ink of the first signature which Shakespeare appended to his Will has now faded almost beyond recognition, but that it was 'Shakspere' may be inferred from the facsimile made by George Steevens in 1776. The second and third signatures to the Will, which are easier to decipher, have been variously read as 'Shakspere,' 'Shakspeare,' and 'Shakespeare'; but a close examination suggests that, whatever the second signature may be, the third, which is preceded by the two words 'By me' (also in the poet's handwriting), is 'Shakspeare.'

'Shakespeare' was the form adopted in the text of all the legal documents relating to the poet's property, and is to be seen in the inscription on his monument in the Church of Stratford-on-Avon. It is followed in the poet's printed signatures affixed by his authority to the dedicatory epistles in the original editions of his two narrative poems, 'Venus and Adonis' (1593) and 'Lucrece' (1594); and it is prominent on the title-pages of almost all contemporary editions of his plays. Consequently, the form 'Shakespeare' alone has the sanction of legal and literary usage. (*Ibid.*, pp. 284-5.)

PLATE I.



SHAKESPEARE'S AUTOGRAPH SIGNATURE APPENDED TO THE PURCHASE-
DEED OF A HOUSE IN BLACKFRIARS ON MARCH 10, 1613.

Reproduced from the original document now preserved in the Guildhall Library, London.

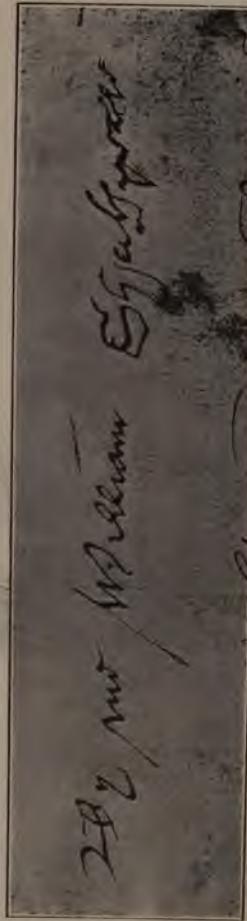


PLATE II.



SHAKESPEARE'S AUTOGRAPH SIGNATURE APPENDED TO A DEED MORTGAGING
HIS HOUSE IN BLACKFRIARS ON MARCH 11, 1613.

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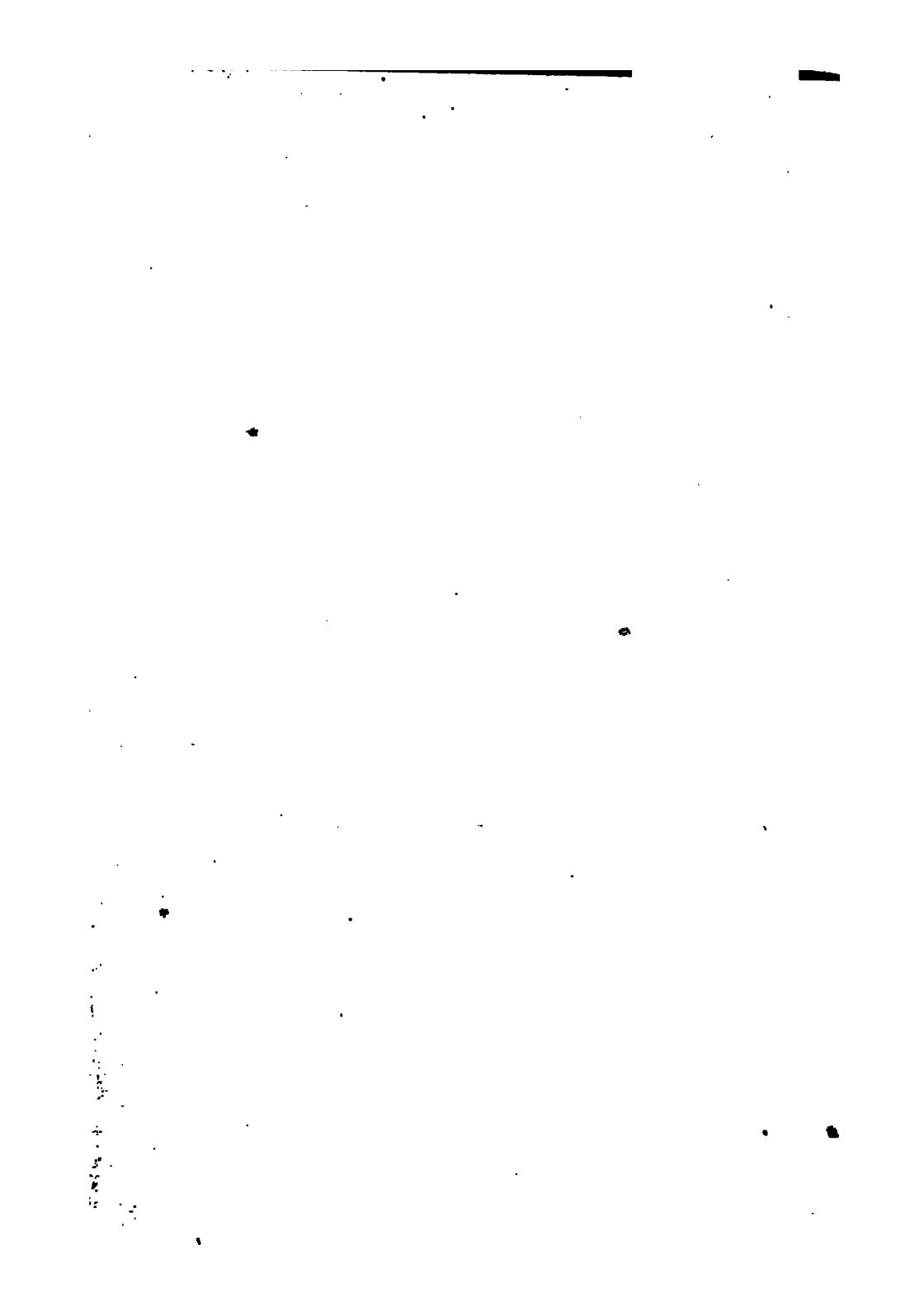
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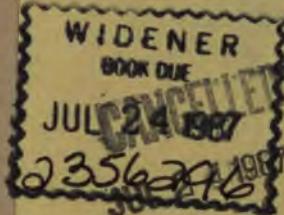
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